

## Slovenia's EU Presidency: 'Si.nergy for Europe'<sup>1</sup>

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**Theme:** This ARI looks at the main challenges faced by the Slovenian Presidency of the EU as the first of the group of countries that joined the Union in 2004.

**Summary:** Slovenia is the first of the member states that joined the EU in 2004 to have introduced the euro and taken up the Presidency of the Union in 2008. As part of the newly-introduced treble Presidency team –the Trio, along with Germany and Portugal–, it will be the last of the initial three to take up the Presidency and its turn will be between those of two member states that are considered the 'engines of European integration': Germany at the beginning of the first Trio and France at the beginning of the second. Slovenia's ambition is to be a 'good Presidency'.

### Analysis:

#### *The Presidency of the EU Taken Up by the 'New' Member States*

At the beginning of Slovenia's Presidency of the Council of the EU, the European Commission (EC) wrote on its website: 'The Presidency is moving to the East'. It thereby stressed that Slovenia –which meanwhile had introduced the euro– was the first of the states that entered the EU in 2004 to take over the Presidency. In the words of the President of the EC, Mr Durão Barroso, this ends –once and for all– the division between the 'old' and 'new' member-states.

The development of the EU since the Maastricht Treaty –up to the conclusion of the Lisbon Treaty– has had a special impact on the recent history of Slovenia and its independence. The Slovenian political agenda in the 1990s included three key projects:

- Independence and international recognition as the basis for its inclusion in the international community and organisations.
- A political and economic transition to enable the introduction of political pluralism, a multi-party political system and a market economy.
- EU membership.

These projects required a national political consensus that has made possible a relative political stability and continued economic growth.

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<sup>1</sup> *Si.nergy for Europe* is the slogan chosen by the Slovenian presidency, related to the Slovenian Internet domain 'si'.

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As a relative latecomer in the so-called Luxembourg group of candidate countries, Slovenia began its accession negotiations in 1998 and successfully completed them in 2002. Its formal EU membership on 1 May 2004 marked the beginning of the 'real work' for Slovenia regarding three main projects:

- Membership of the economic and monetary union and introduction of euro.
- Membership of Schengen.
- EU Presidency.

Fulfilling all the Maastricht criteria, Slovenia introduced the euro on 1 January 2007, thereby changing its currency for the third time since independence. While the introduction of the euro was contingent on Slovenia's own performance, the success of the Schengen project also depended on the cooperation with the other member states of the Schengen area. During the Finish Presidency –at the informal meeting of Ministers of the Interior in Tampere in September 2006–, the Slovenes and Portuguese proved to be crucial in overcoming the 'technical problems' regarding the extension of the Schengen area to the new member states. The Portuguese Minister of the Interior, Antonio Costa, agreed to extend the Schengen Information System (SIS I) to the new member states in order to facilitate their inclusion by 2007. The adoption of this solution is Slovenia's first major success in shaping EU policies.

However, all these important and demanding projects of the past two decades stretched the capacities of the relatively small Slovenian public administration to the maximum. Overworked and underpaid, many experienced and skilled public officials and experts left the public administration and found better paid and less stressful jobs elsewhere.

The successful completion of projects such as membership in the EU, the EMU and Schengen were a historic development for the EU and its (old and new) member states as well as for their citizens and were consequently marked by major –national and European– public celebrations in the presence of key national and EU politicians. The EU Presidency, however, mainly involves the technical coordination of the EU's daily and administrative affairs over six-month periods, which brings no further excitement to a (presiding) country and its citizens. As shown by the Eurobarometer (*Standard Eurobarometer, Autumn 2007*) and by interviews of foreign and Slovene journalists with experts and with the general public, Slovene citizens are well aware of this and see no comparison between the EU Presidency and the already achieved membership of the EU, EMU and Schengen. Pragmatically, they see the EU Presidency as a (mainly) technical project for the Slovenian government, parliament and public administration. However, they still consider it very important for Slovenia to have an enhanced visibility in Europe.

Additionally, Slovenia's EU Presidency is also influenced by the domestic situation and by national politics. It has arrived towards the end of the term of the current government of the Prime Minister Janez Janša, just before the beginning of the campaign for the parliamentary elections to be held at the end of 2008. The success of Slovenia's EU Presidency and the public administration's conduct in this context are likely to be issues in the campaign. To reduce the influence of national politics on Slovenia's EU Presidency and to prepare it properly, however, half a year before its start the government of Janez Janša proposed a co-operation agreement among all political parties in this respect. The agreement, modelled after the so-called 'national unity' agreement of 1997 regarding cooperation on accession to the EU and concluded by all political parties that agreed not to use European issues for electoral advantage, stipulated that the Presidency should not be burdened by domestic politics, problems and issues. However, two important

opposition parties –the LDS (Liberal Democracy of Slovenia) and the SNS (Slovene National Party)– rejected it. Consequently, the government of Janez Janša can expect that also during Slovenia's EU Presidency national politics and problems might demand the government's attention and appropriate actions. Among the prime national issues we can mention collective bargaining and collective agreements, strikes, privatisations, etc. The government also faces a vote of no confidence for individual Ministers and the government, while the Prime Minister himself just before the beginning of Slovenia's EU presidency requested and won a vote of confidence in Parliament, which was seen as an attempt to consolidate and discipline the governmental coalition. At the time, the option was even being discussed that France might take over Slovenia's turn as President.

#### *The Preparatory Stage – Technical View*

In December 2004 the Council of the EU decided that Slovenia would be the first of the 'new' members to preside it. Consequently, in January 2005 Slovenia established a small working group, headed by the Prime Minister, and a broader working group for the preparation of Slovenia's EU Presidency, headed by the Secretary of State for European affairs. The broader working group is made up of five sub-groups, covering the following issues: the EU Presidency programme; staff; public communication; EU Presidency budget; and EU Presidency Secretariat.

The Republic of Slovenia's budget for the period 2005-08 allocates €62 million to the EU Presidency. Compared with the budgets of previous Presidencies this can be considered relatively small. The EU Presidency budget includes the construction of the additional infrastructure necessary for Slovenia's EU Presidency (such as, for instance, a new Congressional Centre in Brdo), for the training and additional education of around 2,100 public officials, for the additional temporary employment of around 300 officials, more than 170 external experts (from Slovenia and abroad) and more than 250 students in public administration, and for some 120 additional temporary posts at the permanent representation in Brussels. These costs, however, are not exclusive to the Slovenian Presidency, but should be considered necessary long-term investments in Slovenia's infrastructure (which, in any case, would have had to be developed sooner or later) and human resources.

From this perspective, the EU Presidency is an outstanding opportunity to update and develop existing know-how and capacities and to acquire new ones. Simultaneously, the EU Presidency is a test of the capacity, competence, knowledge and efficacy of the Slovene public administration in the European and international scenarios, and should be utilised for an even more successful participation of Slovenia and its representatives in the EU and on the international stage.

#### *The Trio – A New Approach to the Presidency of the EU*

In addition to developing their joint 18-month programme for the EU Presidency, the members of the first (presiding) 'Trio' –Germany, Portugal and Slovenia– each have a national programme for their six-month terms as President, more or less based on the 'inherited agenda' of the EU Council.

To ensure the continuity of the EU's policies –regardless of the failure of the Treaty Establishing a Constitution for Europe, which introduced the 'trio presidency'–, the Council adopted amended Rules of Procedure in September 2006, determining that:

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‘Every 18 months, the three Presidencies due to hold office shall prepare, in close cooperation with the Commission, and after appropriate consultations, a draft programme of Council activities for that period.’

Additionally, Germany, Portugal and Slovenia agreed to cooperate and to strive for the realisation of common goals throughout the 18 months of their Presidencies. For Slovenia this cooperation within the Trio is especially important for training, educating and exchanging staff. In the six months of its Presidency, Slovenia is scheduled to preside over two meetings of the European Council, more than 30 meetings of the Council of the EU and more than 50 meetings of Coreper I and II. Added to this, numerous informal meetings with member-states, groups of states and European institutions and an unknown number of unplanned/unexpected activities and events (such as, for instance, the supply of Russian gas in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian disagreements and plans for new pipelines, the independence and international recognition of Kosovo – accompanied by unrest in Serbia and protests in Belgrade–, etc) makes the EU Presidency the most difficult task for Slovenia’s government and public administration so far –far more demanding than the chairmanship of the OSCE or presiding the UN Security Council–.

#### *Slovenian Priorities – **Si**.nergy for Europe*

In the past there was a perception that the big member-states were very ambitious in their plans for their Presidencies, while smaller states tried to be a ‘good Presidency’ that catered to the needs and interests of both member-states and EU institutions. The present Trio has introduced the common 18-month programme and Slovenia does not want to be the weakest link. While presenting Slovenia’s EU Presidency programme in the plenary session of the European Parliament, Prime Minister Janez Janša said:

‘Maybe our Presidency will not be on such a large scale as the French one, or as resounding as the German one, possibly our public administration does not have such a tradition as the British one... possibly we will make some mistakes.... say something too directly, possibly in a naïve way... however, Slovenia undertakes its role with all responsibility... We will not compete for the spotlight... we will pay all due attention to the content. We are aware what we need to do to succeed so far and to be here today...’

Slovenia has defined five priorities in its national programme for the Presidency of the Council of the EU. The President of the European Commission, Mr Durão Barroso has said that ‘Slovenia makes concrete policy reform for citizens a central priority’. These priorities are:

- (1) The timely ratification of the Lisbon Treaty –the first EU treaty signed by all 27 member states– in all member states. As one of 18 states that ratified the Treaty Establishing a Constitution for Europe, Slovenia considers the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty and its entry into force –which would ensure the necessary legal stability for the EU’s future development– the key priority before the elections for the European Parliament in 2009. There is only a year to ratify the treaty in accordance with the national legislations of each member state. To serve as a positive example, Slovenia ratified the Treaty in January 2008 in order to encourage other countries to speed up the process. Being rather naïve in their efforts, Slovene politicians soon learnt the lesson. When in January 2008 the Slovene Prime Minister informed Portugal (on the eve of its decision on the mode of ratifying the Lisbon Treaty) that a possible referendum on the Lisbon Treaty could lead to delays in its ratification, he was warned by the Portuguese Prime Minister José Sócrates that any sovereign nation-state –hence, Portugal

also– should have the right to carry out the procedure in accordance with its national legislation and taking into account its national political circumstances. Portugal has decided to ratify the Lisbon Treaty in Parliament.

- (2) Energy and environment are key global issues. Based on the proposal of the European Commission of January 2008 and in accordance with the conclusions of the European Council of March 2007 regarding the EU's new integrated climate and energy policies, negotiations should take place during the Slovenian Presidency and it is hoped that an agreement will be reached by the end of 2008.
- (3) The beginning of Slovenia's Presidency coincides with the beginning of the implementation of the second of the three-year cycles of the renewed Lisbon Strategy. At the European Council meeting in March 2008 the heads of state and government will decide on the further implementation of the strategy of growth and employment. Following the Strategic report of the European Commission, Slovenia will work for the adoption of the integrated (integral) directives/guidelines for growth and employment (2008-10) –paying adequate attention to national programmes of reform and being aware that the big and economically powerful member states can be the 'engines' of European integration–. Unfortunately, Britain's Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, failed to invite Slovenia –as EU President– to the informal meeting held in January 2008 by France, Germany, Italy, the UK and the President of the EC, Mr Durão Barroso, on behalf of the EU.
- (4) Building on positive experiences of the 'Eastern policy' and 'Nordic cooperation' in the past and the current 'Mediterranean policy', since 2004 Slovenia has tried to make the countries of the Western Balkans one of the core issues of the EU agenda as, in addition to their geographical proximity, they share historical, economic, political and cultural links with Slovenia. Peace and stability in the Balkans are important for the peace, stability and welfare of Europe as a whole, considering that a third of the EU's current member states share their borders with Western Balkan countries. Slovenia's EU Presidency coincides with key phases in the accession processes of these countries. Croatia's negotiations –that started in 2005– slowed down in 2007 due to their parliamentary elections. Stabilisation and Association Agreements still need to be signed with Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. The status and the recognition of the independence of Kosovo, and the immediate consequences thereof are additional key issues in the region that Slovenia's Presidency has to deal with. In this context the role and activities of Slovenia, as the current EU President are even more important and complex due to the following:
  - (a) As a part of the former Yugoslavia, Slovenia shared the region's history and established many links and connections with it. Consequently, Slovenia knows the region, its individual countries and the problems they are facing. Consequently it understands it better than other EU states and this might be useful when formulating EU policies, when addressing the complex ethnic, political and territorial issues in the area and in managing and resolving crises and conflicts. Simultaneously, Slovenia's linguistic, cultural and economic knowledge and links might be useful in promoting and introducing European standards and EU perspectives –with further South-Eastern enlargement– in the region.
  - (b) These advantages, however, might be reduced substantially because of the perception in certain circles in the region that Slovenia was responsible for the



disintegration of the SFRY. Slovenia's success –a positive example and hope for the future– might also induce a degree of envy. There is also a perception that the only reasons for Slovenia's engagement are its selfish economic and other interests. Consequently, a certain mistrust exists that might have a negative impact on Slovenia's relations and cooperation with these countries. Croatia, for example, accuses Slovenia of using its EU membership and Presidency to exert pressure during its EU accession negotiations.

- (c) By using its geographical proximity, its economic, social and cultural links and its knowledge of the local languages and cultures, Slovenia managed to develop intense economic cooperation with the countries of the region after 2000. However, problems in bilateral and/or multilateral relations, such as Serbia's reaction to the independence of Kosovo, might have an impact on economic cooperation and on Slovenia's direct foreign investments in the region –not only by causing lower growth rates, but even possibly by substantially reducing them–.
- (d) Additionally, there are certain open political issues (eg, border issues with Croatia and the Croat economic, fishing and ecological zone in the Adriatic Sea) and economic problems (eg, the savings of citizens of those countries in the Ljubljanska Banka and property) that should not be disregarded, as they might discredit Slovenia as a possible negotiator and mediator on the EU's behalf and might have a negative impact on the EU's role in ensuring the region's peace, stability and economic development. After all, Slovenia cannot ignore its specific national interests in the region and should exercise a substantial level of caution in that respect. Consequently, in order to protect several billion euros in investments and economic interests –regardless of its role in the process and its EU Presidency–, Slovenia cannot be among the first countries to officially recognise Kosovo's independence. The case of Kosovo's independence at the same time reveals the lack of consensus within the EU and the absence of a common foreign and security policy, which is the EU's main disadvantage compared with the US, that is simultaneously trying to influence the foreign policy of individual EU member states (shown by the notes prepared by the Slovenian Ministry of Foreign Affairs on US-Slovene cooperation that were published in the Slovenian and Serbian press). Slovenia finally recognised Kosovo's independence at the beginning of March 2008, with a vote of 57 in favour and four against in the National Assembly (out of 90 members of the Slovenian Parliament). The Slovenian public, however, was more divided on the issue, with almost half opposing any immediate recognition, especially those of greater age and a higher level of education (*Politbarometer* 2/2008, February 2008, p.31, Center za raziskovanje javnega mnenja, [http://www.cjm.si/sites/cjm.si/files/file/raziskava\\_pb/pb2\\_08.pdf](http://www.cjm.si/sites/cjm.si/files/file/raziskava_pb/pb2_08.pdf)).
- (5) The year of intercultural dialogue –2008– can be considered Slovenia's attempt to make a permanent place for ethnic diversity and intercultural dialogue on the EU's agenda, aware that overcoming stereotypes and prejudices is of vital importance for the EU's democratic development in various fields, such as human rights, the prevention of all forms of discrimination, controlling migration, offering asylum, fighting crime and terrorism, etc. In the international context, coexistence in diversity and interculturalism are strategic preconditions for the EU to implement successful and credible action in its foreign, security and neighbourhood policies, humanitarian aid, etc.

This priority became a challenge when –in October 2007– more than 50 members of the European Parliament called on the Prime Minister, Janez Janša, to organise a conference on the Roma during the Slovenian Presidency, claiming that around 10 million Roma could be considered a ‘invisible EU members’. Although Slovenia formally favours the development of policies and instruments for the Romas’ inclusion in the EU, it decided to reject this suggestion due to its ‘full schedule and limited resources’. The decision, however, should be viewed in a broader context: in addition to the fact that the situation of the Roma in different member states differs substantially, there is no political consensus regarding operational goals, policies or measures for integration of the Roma and these issues are considered ‘politically sensitive’. Slovenia formally explained that good intentions are not enough and that any activity without a clearly expressed political consensus regarding a time-frame and the goals involved might actually work to the detriment of the Roma or other minorities.

**Conclusions:** Slovenia’s Presidency will end the 18-month programme of the first Trio. To a large extent, this common programme and contemporary developments within the EU have conditioned the priorities and activities of the Trio’s individual national EU Presidency programmes. Consequently, the following conclusions can be drawn regarding the Slovenian Presidency:

- (1) Slovenia, as the last of the first Trio should now focus on the ratification of the Treaty, a process that will –most likely– be concluded during the French Presidency.
- (2) The so called ‘inherited agenda’ of the Council of the EU includes the review of the Lisbon Strategy and climate issues.
- (3) The fact that Slovenia is the last of this Trio automatically means that much of the programme has been carried out by its predecessors Germany and Portugal.
- (4) The German Presidency –immediately preceding those of Portugal and Slovenia– and the French Presidency –the first of the second Trio– are setting the stage and the framework for pursuing their own ambitions as big states, the ‘driving-force of European integration’. The Portuguese Presidency managed to organise the intergovernmental conference and successfully concluded the Lisbon Treaty. Consequently, as with many small states before, the only reasonable role Slovenia can play is that of a ‘good Presidency’, ie, in the words of Dr Danilo Türk, President of the Republic of Slovenia, a ‘Presidency that is principled, impartial and in the best interests of the EU as a whole’.

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